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SUBJECT: HYPE VERSUS REALITY OVER TURKEY'S ALCOHOL "BAN"

REF: ANKARA 6878

Classified by Acting Political Counselor Charles O. Blaha,
E.O. 12958, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Reports of alcohol "bans" by Turkey's ruling pro-Islam Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the headlines are largely exaggerated and misleading. The reality is that control over liquor sales and licensing, once held by provincial governors, has been turned over to municipalities as part of a larger decentralization reform. There are some bans on alcohol sale and consumption on municipal property, but no direct correlation between such bans and AKP control. However, AKP's secular opponents have seized the opportunity to accuse AKP of Islamifying the country, hoping to use the hype as one tool to force early elections (reftel). End Summary.

Hype Versus Reality

2. (U) Recent press has focused on a supposed push of PM Erdogan's AKP government to ban alcohol sales in Turkey. Sabah newspaper reported on December 4 that 62 of 81 provinces have imposed bans on the sale and consumption of alcohol in places owned by public institutions. Critics claim this is yet another way AKP is turning Turkey into an Islamic state. However, the statistics are misleading.

3. (U) The truth is that municipalities can ban the sale and consumption of alcohol on municipal property, but there is no direct correlation between AKP and alcohol bans on municipal property. In 19 of Turkey's 81 provincial capital municipalities there are no such bans; 14 of the 19 municipalities with no bans have AKP mayors. Of the 62 provincial capitals with alcohol bans on municipal property, 18 have non-AKP mayors.

4. (U) Nihat Ergun, AKP Deputy Chairman in charge of local administrations, says that as part of the Public Administration Reform law which took effect in 2005, municipalities took control over alcohol sales and licensing from provincial governors, thus aiding in the decentralization process.

5. (U) Reports have emerged of officials branding streets where alcohol is sold as "red." In the past the sale of alcohol was prohibited in a 200-meter radius of a school or a place of worship. Ironically -- and what is not making headlines -- is that due to urbanization, AKP lawmakers actually lowered the prohibited radius to only 100 meters in two amendments in 2003 and 2005.

AKP Says Protecting Youth From Alcohol

6. (U) The AKP government cites Article 58 of the Constitution, which deals with the protection of youth, as justification to regulate alcohol sales. In November PM Erdogan said that "Article 58 of the Constitution is very clear. The state is obligated to protect youth from alcohol addiction. The municipalities can issue licenses to anyone who wants to obtain them for tourist facilities, hotels, and restaurants, but does not serve alcohol at their own sites."

7. (C) In his December 15 introductory meeting with the Ambassador (septel), Erdogan complained about the misleading media coverage of the issue, citing the Article 58 rationale for restricting consumption and sale in municipal facilities. Erdogan noted that there are alcohol restrictions in municipal facilities all over the world, including the U.S.

8. (U) Nevertheless, the secular Ankara Bar Association is gathering evidence in preparation for a suit against the Greater Ankara and district municipalities. Bar Association President Vedat Ahsen Cosar says the alcohol "ban" imposed by AKP municipalities is a violation of human rights. Ergun welcomed the suit, predicting that the results would show that there are no covert Islamic plans to rid the country of alcohol.

What AKP Knows About Alcohol: Everything But The Taste

¶9. (U) Several AKP ministers have publicly denied allegations of alcohol bans. Speaking earlier this year to the Turkish Winemakers Association, DPM Sener, an observant Moslem, said, "You might ask what I know about wine. I know everything but the taste." Sener called for an increase in Turkish wine production. Sener later told the press, "At one time in the U.S., with a clause in its Constitution, alcohol sales and usage were banned. There cannot be a ban on alcohol, but there are some arrangements in our regulations. These arrangements state that places that sell alcohol should be at a certain distance from schools and places of worship. Other than the general arrangements, I do not think that there is any restriction or ban."

¶10. (U) Interior Minister Abdulkadir Aksu also denied that municipal officials have designated drinking areas as "red," proclaiming such an act would be illegal. Yet headlines appeared in dailies along with a map of Istanbul's Uskudar district highlighting supposed drinking ("red") and non-drinking streets. In another attempt to stir the pot, several Turkish newspapers portrayed our visit to Ergun as an expression U.S. concern over the supposed "ban." Aksu and Ergun attribute the media hype to those who wish to bring down AKP.

¶11. (U) In an interview published December 19, pious FM Gul denied the existence of any alcohol bans, claiming that new regulations actually made it easier for restaurants to get liquor licenses. Gul admitted that there are limitations on locations where alcohol can be served, "but the rest is propaganda."

¶12. (C) Comment: The hype over AKP's alcohol "ban" illustrates the tendency of AKP's secular opposition to seize on anything that can be portrayed to smack of perceived Islamification of Turkey. Nothing has changed with regard to alcohol control except the regulating authority. Some mayors have taken liberties with enforcement, but even FM Gul has said that they will be "educated" about implementation. Turkey's leaders realize that without alcohol, Turkey would lose tourism dollars. Even the pro-Islam AKP government cannot allow that to happen. End Comment.
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